

# Start physical literacy in infancy

**Robyn Pearce** writes that it increases self-control and resilience

**M**aking good choices in anything, including how to use our time well, is closely linked to some core behaviours. One of them is self-control. For example, if I don't do this interesting but time-wasting activity right now, I could get started on study for that preparation, test or exam; digital surfing is just one tantalising and addictive behaviour.

Another is resilience. How adept are we at coping with frustration or stressful situations? How much time do we waste sounding off at irritating people?

Is there some way that parents and educators can help develop self-control and resilience? Yes, and it starts in infancy.

## One way is to start physical literacy with toddlers

Sophie Foster, founder of Jumping Beans, a New Zealand-based baby gym programme which teaches very small children physical literacy, has uncovered significant research showing clear links between physical activity, improved academic learning, and also self-control.

Her research shows convincingly that movement is the foundation of learning. In the first five years, as brain pathways form, if pre-schoolers are taught how to climb, roll and tumble safely this provides the building blocks for many other aspects of development.

## Benefits of developing physical literacy

Tiny children, barely walking, can learn to control their bodies while they learn fundamental movement skills such as locomotion, springing and landing, and manipulative skills like ball throwing and catching.

It teaches the children skills that help minimise accidents – a form of accident-proofing, if you like.

They learn how to safely engage with others, to take turns and to be part of a team.

It builds parental confidence to let them engage in healthy rough-and-tumble, instead of falling into the modern trap of cocooning and cotton wool-wrapping their children.

Even more importantly, it also builds resilience and self-control.

## Research on resilience and self-control

Apart from the reasons above, why is it important that children learn these skills at a very young age?

A very interesting longitudinal study led by Prof Richie Poulton has been running in New Zealand since 1972. Under the umbrella



of the University of Otago, the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health & Development Study (Dunedin Study for short) embarked on a ground-breaking nature/nurture test, to study 1037 babies for their entire lives. In 2016, they were still tracking at 95% retention. Their research assesses many criteria, of which one is self-control.

One set of findings, run when the participants were 32, showed clear evidence that the children with higher self-control skills as very small children had significantly fewer issues with crime, drugs, and educational problems of both learning and behaviour. The skills included conscientiousness, self-discipline and perseverance. The participants with high quotas of self-control showed to be significantly more effective with health, financial literacy and wealth creation, relationships and contentment.

## What if they're older? Is it too late?

For almost all readers of this article, the children you're interacting with have passed babyhood. Is there anything you can do as they go through the school system?

A few years ago I came across *Boys Adrift: the five factors driving the growing epidemic of unmotivated boys and underachieving young men* by Canadian doctor Leonard Sax MD PhD. He had become very concerned about an increasing number of young men with no obvious ambition and drive.

Just one of the points Dr Sax develops is that many schools (at least in America) have all but eliminated opportunities for kids to develop resilience through experiencing true competition in their physical education programmes. The rationale seems to be that if a child doesn't win at whatever they're competing in, that their self-esteem might be damaged; it's better that no one be a 'loser'. But isn't it critical to provide healthy opportunities for our boys to flex their muscles, prove their manliness and learn to handle competition and frustration? Certainly Dr Sax believes so.

We also see this 'softening of potential hurt'

on an academic level. I realise I'm opening myself to criticism when writing for an audience of educators, but look at modern exam systems. Heaven forbid that a young adult might feel 'dumb' when they don't get good enough grades! But here's the rub: in the adult world, you're a responsible worker – or you lose your job. If you're a commission agent you have to make sales – or you don't eat. If you're in finance, the accounts are either correct – or they're not. If you run your own business, you either succeed – or you don't. Real life isn't one of half measures.

The book is well-worth a read. In it you'll also find practical and useful insights into what current trends in education are doing to many boys; the impact of video games on their behaviour; his theories on why there's such a rapid increase in ADHD, and what can be done about it; how plastics are affecting male hormone levels, and much more.

If we don't give our children the chance to learn resilience and self-control when we're there to support them, starting from a very young age, we do them great harm. The people with poor resilience will always struggle, for the adult world doesn't soft-soap failure, incompetence and poor self-control.

## Sources

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<http://jumpingbeans.net/>

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**Robyn Pearce** is known around the world as the Time Queen, helping people discover new angles on time. Check the resources on her website <http://www.gettingagrip.com>

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